

Positioning Your Grant Request for The Best Results

“You can get us a grant for that, right?”

Every development professional hears this statement at one point (or many points) in his or her career. It’s a legitimate question.

More likely than not, a need has been identified, and your board or program staff have come up with a creative and effective way to not only address that need but to make an impact.

Now all you need is the funding. So, you’ll just spend a few minutes on Guidestar, find a charitable foundation that looks promising and fire off a request, right? WRONG!

Submitting a proposal to a foundation without first taking the time to do some research and connect by phone or in person with the program officers can drastically decrease your chances for funding success. Keeping these simple steps in mind can make a big difference.

Research, Research, Research:

Make sure you understand a foundation’s grant-making priorities, their focus, and their capacity. Reading a foundation’s annual report is a great way to learn about the types of organizations that are being funded, and the amounts awarded.

- If you have a \$75,000 project and the average grants awarded by the foundation are in the \$5,000 range, you know you’re going to have to come up with some other funding sources.
- If you represent an arts organization and you see only social service or environmental groups on the list of funded organizations, you may not be a good fit for this particular funder.

In fact, many foundations report that the most frequent reason for grant requests being denied is that the project and/or organization is simply not a good fit for their funding priorities.

The Fine Print:

Pay careful attention to a foundation’s deadlines and funding cycles. Take a look at the types of attachments they require and make sure you can easily assemble everything that is needed. Not submitting all the required attachments can be the undoing of the best-written proposal, so make sure you know what’s expected from the start.

To Call or Not to Call, That is the Question:

While many foundations welcome calls to their program staff, some may be not be staffed to accommodate this and some may discourage phone calls in order to guard against high call volume interfering with the work of the program staff. In your research, make sure to find out if the foundation has stated a preference for initial contact and abide by those instructions. If the guidelines clearly state that a letter of intent is required prior to an application, phone calls are not advised. Calling a program officer and opening with, “I know it said on your web site that a letter of intent is required but I just have a few quick questions,” is an excellent way to get off to a bad start!

Making the Call:

You’ve done your research, your project aligns with the foundation’s giving priorities, you’ve read the guidelines and now it’s time to introduce yourself. But before you make that call take a few moments to gather your thoughts, make some notes and even rehearse if possible. Don’t be nervous. Program officers are people too and they want your proposal to be as strong as possible.

Have a brief (3-4 sentences) description of the project ready to share and be prepared to describe how you think the program aligns with the foundation’s focus. Take care though, not to be presumptuous. Avoid phrases such as “this is perfect for your funding priorities,” which can sound a bit pushy.

You may have to provide a brief (brief!) snapshot of your organization’s history and any projects that have previously been funded by this or other foundations in the region.

The funder will also likely inquire as to how you plan to ensure the sustainability of the project beyond the foundation’s investment.

Don’t Forget to Listen:

It can be easy to get carried away with enthusiasm for your project and to want to make as strong an impression as possible on the funder. But don’t forget 50% of any phone or in-person meeting is listening. Don’t overlook valuable information, tips, and guidance from the program officer in your haste to get through your pitch. Slow down, listen and ask questions if you need clarification. You’ll make as much of an impression by the way you listen as you will by what you say.

Keep it Brief:

Be conscious of the program officer’s time and keep your conversation as brief as possible. You might want to re-iterate key points before you hang up, to make sure you interpreted the program



officer's advice correctly. Some foundation staff members are happy to read early drafts of your proposals, but others may not be able to, due to the sheer volume of proposals they receive. Feel free to ask if this is a possibility but be prepared for that the answer might be "no". Thank him or her for their time and ask if you may call again if you have further questions.

Now you're ready to sit down and write that winning proposal! Good luck!

